

AGING MATTERS: Ombudsman Program



McConnell

A few months ago, a bank contacted a local Area Agency on Aging to speak to an Ombudsman regarding a customer's overdrawn checking account. After looking into the situation, it soon became evident that a staff member from a long-term care facility had befriended a resident who had vision and hearing difficulties. The patient had no family and depended on the staff member for help with various errands around town. After the staff member became associated with managing the resident's banking transactions, he was able to change the patient's statement address, order a debit card, and withdraw thousands of dollars from the resident's life savings. The Office on Aging then worked closely with the Attorney General's Office to prosecute the staff member, who is now serving time in jail.

The Ombudsman Program is designed to help by advocating on a resident's behalf, with the goal of improving the quality of life and quality of care for all residents in long-term care facilities in South Carolina. Ombudsmen receive complaints about long-term care services and act on behalf of the resident to relay the concerns to nursing homes, residential care facilities, and other providers of long-term care.

In 2011 alone, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program investigated over 7,000 complaints. If you have a concern about a parent or loved one in a nursing home or care facility, our state's Ombudsman Program is available to assist you in getting your issue resolved. A regional Ombudsman can be found within your local Area Agency on Aging, and anything that is shared with an Ombudsman is strictly confidential.

Residents in long-term care facilities are often physically and emotionally vulnerable due to their age and various physical and health disorders. Mistreatment of a loved one can occur in a variety of ways, but the most common forms include:

- **Abuse** (includes physical or sexual assault or psychological abuse, such as threats and harassment);
- **Neglect** (includes failing to provide adequate food, housing, medicine or supervision); and
- **Exploitation** (includes taking advantage of a person or their money).

Whenever problems arise, residents or families can call upon a Long-Term Care Ombudsman for help. Our office encourages you to report abuse, neglect, or exploitation as soon as possible so that an investigation can be opened.

Experience has shown that when residents and families understand the long-term care system, they are able to effectively act on their own when problems occur. By educating residents, families, and facility staff, the Ombudsman Program is able to foster an understanding and knowledge of the long-term care system.

Question of the Week:

Q:) What can I do to minimize my loved one's vulnerability in their facility?

A:) Steps you can take include:

- Attend the facility's care plan meetings with the resident or as their family representative.
- Visit the facility and ask questions.
- Review your loved one's financial statements regularly and encourage your personal banker to be aware of abnormal spending patterns.
- Familiarize yourself with resident's rights, which are located on our website (www.aging.sc.gov).

For more information, contact SC Lieutenant Governor's Office on Aging (803-734-9900 or 800-868-9095) or visit www.aging.sc.gov.